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Real-Life Espionage Takes to the Stage

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EM. Forster once wrote that if he were forced to choose between betraying his country and betraying his friends, he prayed he would have the courage to betray his country.

It is this moral dilemma which lies at the heart of "Pack of Lies," the play opening on Broadway tomorrow night after a successful run in London.

The plot of Hugh Whitmore's drama cleaves closely to a real-life spy case, in which a Soviet agent in London, Gordon Lonsdale, was arrested in 1961 along with an American couple, Helen and Peter Kroger, and two Britons. The two British citizens, employees at an anti-submarine warfare research institute, were passing on stolen documents to Lonsdale who gave them to the Krogers to transmit to Russia.

The Krogers lived in the ordinary middle-class London suburb of Ruislip, in an ordinary brick row house, across the street from a very ordinary and happily married middle-aged family, Bob and Barbara Jackson. It also happened that the Krogers and the Jacksons were best friends; Helen Kroger was practically an aunt to the Jacksons' teen-age daughter, Julie.

The drama, which emphasizes psychological tensions rather than spy thriller suspense, begins when the unsuspecting Jacksons are drawn into the case by an officer of MI5, the British intelligence agency. He tells them only that a foreign spy has been glimpsed in their vicinity. Would the Jacksons please be patriotic and let MI5 station a surveillance crew in their daughter's bedroom for the weekend?

Bob Jackson, a gentle, well-intentioned engineer who works for the RAF, agrees. But the two days of surveillance grow into weeks and the Jacksons are sucked deeper into the web of deception. Ultimately, the Jacksons' dearest values, trust and respect for authority, have corroded and the family is ruined. "I've betrayed Helen as much as she has be-

trayed me," laments Barbara in the climactic revelation of the play.

In the play, Rosemary Harris stars as the meek, painfully decent Barbara, and Patrick McGoohan, best known in the United States for his role in the television series "Secret Agent," as the charming, superior and coolly detached MI5 operative who manipulates them.

Hugh Whitmore originally became interested in the story in 1970 when he had dinner with Gay Search, the daughter of the real-life British couple, Ruth and Wilfrid Search. The Krogers — that is the name they actually used in England — had just been released from serving a 20-year prison sentence and had been swapped with Moscow for a British agent, Gerald Brook.

Two months later, Mrs. Search, who had not seen her once dear friend after the arrests, died unexpectedly of a heart attack. In the play, these events are gradually disclosed, sometimes through simple monologues by the characters.

"I was really knocked out by this story," recalled Mr. Whitmore. So he set about writing a documentary on the Krogers' entrapment, which appeared on BBC television in 1971. But the story still haunted him.

"I came from a very similar background," Mr. Whitmore said in an interview in Boston, where the show played for three weeks before moving to Broadway's Royale Theater. Like the Searches, or the Jacksons, his family were solid members of the lower middle class, "decent, honorable people, living a bland, uneventful suburban life." Both his father and Wilfrid Search worked in the same office all their lives.

"People like them are the backbone of society," Mr. Whitmore observed. "They pay their taxes, are law-abiding, and get only minimal rewards."

Bit by bit, Mr. Whitmore decided to go back to the spy case and "use the theater to show what happens when ordinary people are caught up in a moral and emotional dilemma."

He kept the factual details of the Lonsdale affair, but in a nice twist, used his own parents as the model for the Jacksons. "I only met Mr. Search three times, but I knew Gay very well and I knew enough to realize the families were very similar," he explained.

"It was all there in my head. I just had to ask myself, what would have happened if it had been my parents."

When "Pack of Lies" was showing in London last year, his parents came to see it "and recognized themselves, with some pleasure, I might add," Mr. Whitmore said.

The playwright, who is 48 years old and a former actor, seems intrigued by deception in the heart of domesticity. He was also the author of "Concealed Enemies," the Emmy Award-winning mini-series on Public Television based on the Alger Hiss case. This week is an important one for Mr. Whitmore, who in addition to the opening of "Pack of Lies," also has the New York premiere of a film for which he wrote the screenplay, "The Return of the Soldier," starring Glenda Jackson, Julie Christie, Ann-Margret and Alan Bates.

To Mr. Whitmore, one of the most intriguing aspects of the Lonsdale affair was that Barbara, the housewife, actually outsmarted Helen Kroger, a trained spy and a colonel in the K.G.B.

In real life Mrs. Search almost cracked and gave away the secret to her friend. It was at Christmas, and Barbara wanted to put a warning message saying "Go" in a mince pie she had baked for the Krogers. But she didn't. Mr. Whitmore omitted the episode from the play.

The Krogers were actually Morris and Lona Cohen from West 71st Street in New York. Morris Cohen had grown up in the Depression, fought in the Spanish Civil War and became an antiquarian book dealer as well as an ardent member of the Communist Party. Lona Cohen, more brash and gregarious than her soft-spoken husband, was the daughter of Polish immigrants.

In Mr. Whitmore's study of them, they were "somewhere on the fringes of the Rosenberg case," and when the Rosenbergs were arrested, they immediately fled the United States. Somehow, evidently with help from the Russians, they turned up in New

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Zealand where they acquired the identity of a couple who had died in a car crash, the Krogers, then moved to London. To explain their American accents, they pretended to be Canadians.

The Krogers, who are now 71 and 74 years old, now live in the land of her ancestors, in Krakow, an ancient university town well-suited to a former antiquarian bookseller. Wilfrid Search, at 80, lives on in the same house in London.

Mr. Whitmore doesn't think there is an easy answer to the conundrum that confronted the Searches. "Ultimately, it's ambiguous," he suggested. "The MI5 people have a responsibility to catch spies, I suppose, but the price they exacted from the Searches was a very high one."

The most difficult part of writing the play was to make the ordinary Search family seem interesting, Mr. Whitmore said. Having Rosemary Harris and Patrick McGoohan starring in those roles has helped, he added, for every night during the play's stand in Boston they improvised new details "to make the characters grow."

"It's wonderful for me, because if you write a play about lies, you want it to be as truthful as possible," he said. ■